

Student Biographies and Abstracts

Panel: “The American Presidency”

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Title: “John Adams: The Measure of a Man”

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Katherine Lautzenhiser is a history major who will be graduating this May. Katherine’s history career at IPFW has focused on American history, and her particular interest within American history is the Revolution. She hopes to further her education in both history and library science and to work with students in developing both a passion for and the skills necessary for understanding history.

Abstract

America’s second president has been an intriguing figure to generations of historians. As with any complex figure, there is a lack of agreement concerning John Adams. In dissecting the complexities of the man and the events comprising his life in service to the United States, two distinct layers of understanding appear. The first layer of John Adams is as the figurehead of American political conflict at home and abroad. He was controversial; he was a lesser shadow of the great president who came before him; he was a political giant in a pivotal time in American history. He was any number of things to historians who search for an understanding of such a critical time in history.

The second layer, however, cannot be forgotten: the John Adams who emerges from the pages of private letters and records—a man bound, as any man is, by his own humanity. It is in this second layer that the measure of John Adams truly came alive. It is where he asked tough questions of himself, where he criticized and hoped and debated. It is where John Adams can be truly evaluated for history. He is the one who set his own standard for what would make a good executive. He had ideals and expectations for the office and for the responsibilities of the president. He also had expectations for the kind of man that should be placed in this office. Ultimately, Adams believed that he earned the office that he occupied from 1797-1801 and he fulfilled his own expectations for the presidency. John Adams as a president can be evaluated by any number of expectations but it is ultimately his own by which he succeeded.

The XYZ Affair is the perfect lens through which to view and measure John Adams. The conflict with France at this crucial stage in development for the United States overshadowed Adams’s entire presidency and the events and details of Adams’s policies reveal how Adams measured up to his own ideals. It was a challenge of how his ideals would translate into the reality of party politics, a weak and struggling new government, and a virtually blank slate on which Adams could develop the office of the presidency in his own terms. It is during the XYZ Affair that Adams was afforded the opportunity to prove the legitimacy of his ideals.

Selected Bibliography

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